

Remembering Those Before Us

Heb. 11:29-12:2

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We pick up this week from where we left off last week in the book of Hebrews. If you remember, last week the author gave a paradoxical definition of faith – being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see – then lifted up Abraham and Sarah as examples of people who trusted in God even when the motivation for doing so wasn't apparent. They kept their faith even when they didn't have a good reason to do so.

Remember the audience: the author is writing to a group of newly converted Christians who are facing serious persecution and are considering returning to Judaism. They were struggling to understand if what they believed about Christ was actually true and worth the sacrifice. Wouldn't it be easy to just give in and go back to what's safe?

So in Chapter 11, the author unrolls an impressive list of people who down through the ages lived out their faith, believing in God's promises despite the evidence. He starts with Abraham and Sarah, and moves to Noah, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses.

That's where we pick up today. The author continues name-dropping from the Old Testament, a total of 18 in all. As former Jews, his audience would have been familiar with each name. Each story would bring to mind a reminiscence. Each phrase about a hero of the past would ring a bell and stir a memory.

Moses leading the people through the Red Sea. Gideon helping make the walls of Jericho fall. Rahab saving the life of Israelite spies. And the author says, "I really don't have time to tell you any more," then goes on to list Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. He reminds them of people who conquered kingdoms and administered justice, who routed foreign armies and escaped the mouths of lions.

Then the author brings it down a notch, moving from the twinkle-eyed successes to those whose fate was less desirable. Don't forget about those who were tortured, chained, and put in prison. They were stoned and put to death by the sword and – my personal favorite – sawed in two. And yet, through all of this, they never lost their faith.

Now, put yourselves in the shoes of the readers of Hebrews. They're complaining about a little persecution, they're balking at some harassment, they're thinking of packing it in at the first sign of trouble. And then you get this letter. Did Abraham give in? Did Moses throw in the towel? They kept the faith, and so should you.

At first glance, this chapter reads like an inspiring Faith Hall of Fame. As you walk in, you see statues of Gideon and Barak. There is David's crown and a lock from Samson's hair. In this other wing there are memorials to those who suffered for their faith. Look, there's the statue of the man who was sawn in two – and there are his legs!

And yet, if we look more closely at the plaques, we learn more than we knew about these so-called heroes. Abraham? He lied about being married to save his own skin – twice! Jacob? He swindled his brother twice and deliberately deceived his father. The almighty Moses? A stutterer with low self-esteem – oh, and a murderer. Rahab was a prostitute. Gideon worshipped idols. Barak was blood-thirsty. Samson was the Dennis Rodman of his time, with a wild lifestyle and libido to match. Jephthah made a foolish vow that cost his daughter her life. David was an adulterer and murderer. Samuel was a

complete failure as a father. The prophets? Don't even get me started on all their neuroses. All of a sudden our extraordinary people of faith are looking quite... ordinary.

Exactly. There was nothing extraordinary about any of these people, except for one thing: they never lost sight of the promise they couldn't see. They never stopped being sure of what they hoped for. They lived out their faith.

Who would be in your personal Faith Hall of Fame? I would put my mom, who always encouraged me to go to church, but never forced me. I'd put Rick Burch in there. He taught my young adult Sunday School class, which, more often than not, had an attendance of one. But he was there every Sunday. Dr. Dwight Stewart would be in there. And Bruce Barkhauer and David Shirey and Larry Kleiman, all ministers I've had the privilege of working with. My grandparents would be in there, too. Who's in yours? Who had an impact on you growing up?

I say to you what the author of Hebrews is saying to his audience: "Look on whose shoulders you are standing." And then he says the most amazing, improbable thing: None of these people received what God had promised. God planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect. Do you realize what he's saying? Our heroes of faith are relying on us to finish the race they started.

Now, last time I checked, we haven't had any congregation members that were sawed in half. No one here has lived in a cave or hole in the ground, and I think I'm safe in saying that, unless you've raised teenagers, you haven't been subjected to any cruel torture. So I ask: what do we have to offer these examples of faith? What can we possibly do that will help bring them to their perfection?

As I see it, there's only one thing we can do. We can trust God, even when the evidence says we shouldn't. We can live out the definition of faith, being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we don't see. In the midst of our own trials, we can trust in God's promises of love and guidance. As our relationships and marriages are sawed in two, we trust. As the loss of jobs and death of family members banish us to the dark caves in our hearts, we trust. As we are subjected to the cruel torture of just being alive in this selfish, violent, excessive world, we trust.

Not an easy thing, is it? Our faith is challenged every day. My guess is that so was Moses'. And Samson's. And Dr. Stewart's. And yet, to use the author's metaphor, they have run the race. They were commended for their faith, and have crossed the finish line. They have fought the good fight and not given up, even when it would have been so easy.

And then the author of Hebrews hits us with one of my favorite verses in the Bible. Notice the word it starts with: "therefore." That implies that all that's been said before bears weight on what comes next. And what comes next is this: "Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses" – remember who is in your cloud of witnesses – "let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

Isn't that a beautiful image? Here we are, in the stadium of life, running our race, and there in the stands are all the folks who've come before us, calling our name, encouraging us to cross the finish line. With such a cheering section behind us, how can we give up running?

It's tempting at times, when the weight of the world and our own sin weighs us down. It can get heavy, can't it? I watched a documentary a while ago on Mt. Everest, and the crew that climbed that majestic mountain carried up with them an IMAX camera.

This is no point-and-shoot disposable. That camera weighed 60 pounds, not to mention all the equipment that went with it. I wouldn't carry 60 pounds to the next room, much less up Mt. Everest. And yet, they made it to the top.

We are similarly encouraged. Even though we get weighed down, we are called to throw off everything that hinders and entangles, and run with perseverance. That's a key word here. Life is no 100-yard dash. You might get through one week, but that's not perseverance. I've just recently started running on the treadmill at home. I'll crank up the speed and run until I'm tired and sweaty and my side hurts and I'm ready to fall down. That's the first 30 seconds. After that, it gets a little tougher. But I keep running.

Run with perseverance. Run as if you have somewhere to run. In the Christian life, we have a goal. We are not tourists here, who return each night to where we start. We are pilgrims, ever on the way. The Christian life should be going somewhere, and each week when we gather here, we should see if we're any further along than last week.

We run, because Jesus has set the course. Hebrews says he's both the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. He's the one who gives us faith, and he's the one who makes it complete. We don't have to finish first or beat someone else; we only have to run, knowing that Jesus runs with us.

The baton has been passed from Abel to Noah to Abraham, each runner handing it to the next one. Down through the centuries many famous people – and many more people we've never heard of – have run the race, trusting in God despite the circumstances, throwing off the weight of anything that was keeping them from God.

What weight do we need to throw off today? A particular behavior? An attitude toward someone? A feeling that we're not good enough? A schedule that leaves no time for God? Throw off everything that hinders and run the race that's been set out for you. Be the best Christian you can be. Live the most Christ-like life you can live. There are no shortcuts. It's not always easy. But there is a whole stadium full of witnesses cheering you on. Keep running.